

How to Meditate

Buddhist meditation gives us time to slow down and wake up. Learn how to meditate with plain-language instructions and advice.



Illustrations by Tomi Um.

How to do basic breath meditation

Whether you're trying meditation for the first time or just want a refresher, you can't go wrong with this easy-to-follow meditation.

Find a quiet and uplifted place where you can do your meditation practice.

When starting out, see if you can allow 5 minutes for the practice, and increase that amount over time.

1. **Take your seat.** Sit cross-legged on a meditation cushion, or on a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor, without leaning against the back of the chair.
2. **Find your sitting posture.** Place your hands palms-down on your thighs and sit in an upright posture with a straight back—relaxed yet dignified. With your eyes open, let your gaze rest comfortably as you look slightly downward about six feet in front of you.
3. **Notice and follow your breath.** Place your attention lightly on your out-breath, while remaining aware your environment. Be with each breath as the air goes out through your mouth and nostrils and dissolves into the space around you.

At the end of each out-breath, simply rest until the next in-breath naturally begins. For a more focused meditation, you can follow both the out-breaths and in-breaths.

4. **Note the thoughts and feelings that arise.** Whenever you notice that a thought, feeling, or perception has taken your attention away from the breath, just say to yourself, “thinking,” and return to following the breath. No need to judge yourself when this happens; just gently note it and attend to your breath and posture.
5. **End your session.** After the allotted time, you can consider your meditation practice period over. But there’s no need to give up any sense of calm, mindfulness, or openness you’ve experienced. See if you can consciously allow these to remain present through the rest of your day.

Congratulations — you’ve just meditated. For more guidance, follow along with the audio version of this meditation while sitting:

00:00

00:00

[Use Up/Down Arrow keys to increase or decrease volume.](#)

Breath meditation is a vital practice in itself, but it also represents the very foundation of all of Buddhist meditation’s varied forms. We’ll get to some of these shortly.

But first: you probably have some questions. So let’s address them.



What is meditation and why do you do it?

We meditate for reasons both practical and profound. Some say meditation is the process of mind seeing its own true nature. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche [wrote](#) that meditation is “a means of working with oneself and the phenomenal world.” The Buddha taught meditation as an essential tool to [achieve liberation](#) from [suffering](#). Additionally, we might meditate to specifically cultivate certain positive traits, like friendliness, steadiness, compassion, and joy.

Here are teachings on the meaning of meditation and why we do it:



[How to Look at a Wall](#)

By [Karen Maezen Miller](#)



[Meditation is the Key to Knowing Yourself](#)

By [Pema Chödrön](#)

[More On the Meaning of Meditation»](#)

What are the different varieties of sitting meditation?

Basic Buddhist meditation comes down to two fundamental elements: concentration and insight. These are also called mindfulness and awareness. Many of the terms you have likely heard — *shamatha*, *vipassana*, *zazen*, *vipashyana*, mindfulness, awareness, calm abiding, insight, and so on — are names for one or both of these elements.

Buddhist meditation practice begins with techniques that help us calm and concentrate the mind. What often follows is insight. With the stable, focused, and fully present mind you have developed in your mindfulness practice, you can begin to investigate the nature of reality.

Each Buddhist tradition has its own approach to meditation. Here are our most popular teachings from four different traditions. You can try them out and see what feels most appropriate for you.



[How to Practice Shamatha Meditation](#)

By [Lama Rod Owens](#)



[What Is Vipassana Meditation and How Do You Practice It?](#)

By [Sayadaw U Pandita](#)



[How to Practice Zazen](#)

By [Jules Shuzen Harris](#)



How to Sit

By [Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

Tip: it's perfectly fine to try different meditations, but it's a good idea to stick with one form for a little while before trying another, so that you can develop a better sense for how each meditation feels.



How much should I meditate, and how can I get comfortable?

As Buddhist teacher [Joseph Goldstein](#) has said [about meditation](#), “Something quite extraordinary can happen in even five minutes.” His colleague [Sharon Salzberg](#) concurs, explaining: “Usually when people start sitting, we say that five minutes is enough. You don’t have to think, ‘I’ve got to sit here for six hours.’ You don’t have to get into some pretzel-like posture and suffer!”

Longtime meditators might sit for 20-45 minutes at a time or even longer, but it’s often said that the best practice is the one you can actually do. So start with a small, doable amount of time. You can always increase the length of your meditation later.

If you find meditation uncomfortable, don't worry: many people do at first. *Where do I put my hands? Should I close my eyes? Am I breathing too heavily?* These are all common questions. These tips will help you establish a comfortable, sustainable meditation posture.



I feel a lot of pain when I meditate. What can I do?



The Balanced Body and the Middle Way

[More Tips for Getting Comfortable»](#)



How do I start and maintain a personal meditation practice?

You might well find that you'll want a dedicated meditation cushion (commonly known as a *zafu*) and other accessories to support you in your practice. You may also want to create a dedicated spot for meditation in your home. But as Buddhist teacher [Judy Lief](#) says in her [guidelines for getting started](#), even "if you are going it alone, you have the resources you need."

These tips and instructions will encourage and empower you to start, maintain, and build on your meditation practice.



[How to Start a Home Meditation Practice](#)

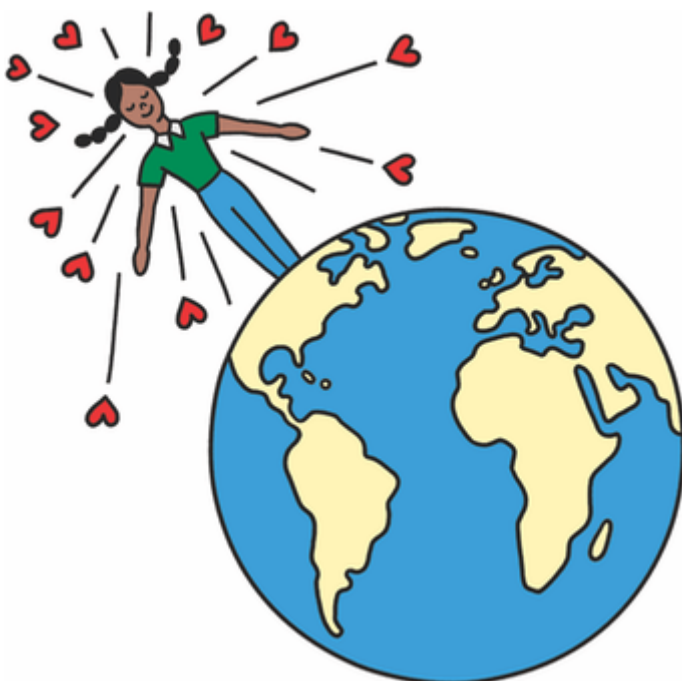
By [Norman Fischer](#)



[Whatever Arises in Your Mind, Be Present](#)

By [Phakchok Rinpoche](#)

[More Tips for Getting Started»](#)



What other kinds of meditation exist?

Breath meditation is the most well-known form of Buddhist meditation, but it's not the only one. The Buddha taught that we should ideally be able to hold the mind of meditation whether standing, sitting, walking, or lying down. Even everyday events like eating an apple or taking a photo on your smartphone can be opportunities to flex our meditation muscles. Various types of meditation are designed to help you cultivate positive qualities.

Some other popular types of meditation are [walking](#), [running](#), [metta](#), and [tonglen](#). Here are some instructions for meditating in many different ways.



[How to Practice Chanting](#)



[Thich Nhat Hanh on Walking Meditation](#)

[More Meditation Instructions»](#)



What's the relationship between meditation and Buddhism?

Meditation is a core component of the Buddhist path. For more information on the teachings of the Buddha and what it means to be a Buddhist, visit our guide, [Buddhism for beginners](#), or browse through our [extensive collection of Buddhist teachings](#):



[Meet the Blue Dragon](#)



[Calling on Jizo](#)

[More Buddhist Teachings»](#)

What do Buddhist teachers say about meditation?

The Buddha told us to see the way things are and then let go of our clinging to them. Take this feeling of letting go as your refuge.

—*Ajahn Chah*

Only dwelling in the present can make us free. We have to look into our suffering, our craving. And when we see its face we will smile: you cannot make me your prisoner any more.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*

“Don’t prolong the past, Don’t invite the future, Don’t alter your innate wakefulness, Don’t fear appearances. There is nothing more than that!

—*Patrul Rinpoche*

Meditation is a process of lightening up, of trusting the basic goodness of what we have and who we are, and of realizing that any wisdom that exists, exists in what we already have. We can lead our life so as to become more awake to who we are and what we’re doing rather than trying to improve or change or get rid of who we are or what we’re doing. The key is to wake up, to become more alert, more inquisitive and curious about ourselves.

—*Pema Chödrön*

The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and emotions and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes onto oneself.

—*Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche*

As long as we remain within the confines of the thinking mind, we can’t experience the state of non-thinking. If we can’t experience non-thinking, we will not understand what our life truly is. Please realize this for yourself. Just sit!

—*Taizan Maezumi Roshi*

Don’t move. Just die over and over. Don’t anticipate. Nothing can save you now because you have only this moment. Not even enlightenment will help you now because there are no other moments. With no future be true to yourself and express yourself fully. Don’t move.

—*Suzuki Roshi*

When we face a situation in which we feel indignation, if we mindfully investigate our own mind, we will discover bitter truths about ourselves: that we are selfish; we are egocentric; we are attached to our ego; we hold on to our opinions; we think we are right and everybody else is wrong; we are prejudiced; and at the bottom of all this, we do not really love ourselves. This discovery, though bitter, is a most rewarding experience. And in the long run, this discovery delivers us from deeply rooted psychological and spiritual suffering.

—*Bhante Henepola Gunaratana*

It’s no small thing to be born human. A lot of “stuff” comes along with the opportunity of human life. Zazen is an incredible doorway for getting to the bottom of it all, and learning to live your life out of what you directly experience yourself: not what somebody tells you, not what you read, not because you should, but because your own direct experience of yourself and your life tells you what to do.

—*John Daido Loori*

Life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each of us

should strive to awaken. Awaken. Take heed, do not squander your life.
—Dogen Zenji

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